

Remarks to the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education

February 24, 1997

Thank you very much. Good morning. Welcome to the White House. Dr. Ponder, Dr. Wilson, Dr. Shaw. Where's Bill Gray? Is he here? You're hiding your light under a bushel back there. *[Laughter]* I wanted to say again to all of you how grateful I am to Bill Gray for the historic role that he assumed in restoring democracy to Haiti. We've got another year behind us now, Bill, and we're still going. Thank you. Dr. Payne and Dr. Hackley, Mr. Secretary. I'd also like to thank Catherine LeBlanc for her work on the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Welcome to the White House. I'm especially glad you could join us during Black History Month as we pay tribute to the contributions of African-Americans to American life. None of those has been more important than our Nation's historically black colleges and universities. When the doors of college were closed to all but white students and black people's aspirations were scorned, historically black colleges and universities gave young African-Americans the high quality education they deserved, the pride they needed to rise above cruelty and bigotry, as the graduates and teachers of HBCU's haven't just taken care of themselves, they fought for freedom and equal opportunity for all other Americans as well. This has been important throughout our history, and in the future it will be more important than ever before, because education will be more important than ever before. To prepare our people for the new century, every young American must have the world's best education.

You know better than anyone how much a difference an education can make. To name just a few of the young Americans who were educated at HBCU's, you'd have to look at Justice Marshall, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, Reverend Jesse Jackson, NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, and of course Dr. King. Eighty-five percent of our Nation's black physicians, 80 percent of our African-American Federal judges, 75 percent of our black Ph.D.'s, 50 percent of our black business executives and elected officials all were educated at HBCU's.

Historically black colleges and universities have served with distinction, of course, in terms of their contributions to our administration: our former Secretary of Energy, Hazel O'Leary; former Surgeon General, Dr. Joycelyn Elders; the Director of Presidential Personnel, Bob Nash; and, of course, as the Vice President said, Alexis Herman, who is here with us today and who did a superb job for us as Director of Public Liaison and, with your help, will be a great Secretary of Labor, and I want your help. *[Applause]* Thank you.

Over the last 4 years, we have put in place a comprehensive college opportunity strategy to make college available to every American citizen. I directed the Department of Education and the White House initiative on historical colleges to work to increase funding to HBCU's. We've made student loans less expensive and much easier to obtain under the direct student loan program. AmeriCorps, our national service program, has given tens of thousands of young people the chance to earn college tuition while serving in their communities. We have created already in the last budget 200,000 more work-study positions to help students work their way through college, and in the new budget there is another 100,000, which will mean we will go from 700,000 to one million work-study slots in only 4 years.

We know that financial aid is critically important. But some of your colleges, as many as 90 percent of the students receive financial aid. Last year we increased the Pell grant program by 20 percent, taking the maximum grant up to \$2,700 from about, wherever it was, \$2,460. That was the biggest increase in 20 years.

This year's budget is bigger still. It increases Pell grants by another 25 percent, the largest increase again in well over 20 years, and increases the maximum Pell grant award to \$3,000 per year. It expands the program to include older students who are starting college late or returning to school. It raises the maximum family income level to include hundreds of thousands of families who did not qualify for Pell grants before. In total, these changes will help almost 350,000 more families send a family

member to college. The balanced budget also includes a \$10,000 tax deduction to help families pay for college and a \$1,500 HOPE scholarship tax credit, which is enough to pay for the tuition at the typical community college in America for 2 years.

This college opportunity agenda will open the doors of college wider than ever before. Now we need to work to make sure that the Congress, without regard to party, will enact these changes into law.

Before I answer questions now, I'd like to ask for your help with one more thing. We all know that literacy is the basic tool of learning. But 40 percent of our children cannot read independently by the time they're 8 years old. We can and must do better. My budget includes more than \$2 billion to help us with the literacy challenge, but that is not enough.

I launched our America Reads initiative to mobilize an army of reading tutors all across America. And I asked college and university presidents to help me achieve that. I sent a senior member of the White House staff, Carol Rasco, to the Department of Education to work with Secretary Riley to make sure the America Reads initiative does that. We have dedicated several thousand AmeriCorps volunteers to becoming trained so they can, in turn, train reading tutors to work with schools, with parents, and with children to help make sure our children can read.

But now we need a lot of volunteers—as many as a million—and a lot of them will have

to come from students. I am pleased to say that over 80 college presidents have already committed thousands of their work-study students to participate as reading tutors. I hope you will join them and commit a percentage of your own work-study students to help our children learn to read, because without literacy, the job manuals and the history books are both closed, and so are the doors of college. We need your help to open them wider.

I'm looking forward to working with you in the months and the years ahead but especially this year to make sure that we pass this education agenda in Congress, number one, and number two, that we enlist the idealism, the ability, and the energy of our young college students in helping us to teach our children to read.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:50 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Henry Ponder, president, and Harrison Wilson, board of directors chairman, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education; Talbert O. Shaw, president, Shaw University; William H. Gray III, president, United Negro College Fund; Joyce Payne, director, Office for the Advancement of Public Black Colleges; and Vic Hackley, chair, President's Advisory Board on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

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Thank you very much. Mr. Secretary, that was a good speech—[laughter]—and fully illustrated Clinton's third law of politics, which is, whenever possible, be introduced by someone you have appointed to high position. [Laughter] Their objectivity is stunning. [Laughter]

I thank Secretary Riley and all the people at the Department of Education for the work that they do. Stan Ikenberry, I'm glad to be here today with all of you. President Knapp, thank you for your moving remarks about the HOPE scholarship. You all laughed when Barry

said he was making a great sacrifice by going to the Aspen Institute, but in Georgia, that's what they think. [Laughter]

President-elect Myers, and to my friend Barry Munitz—you know, we're all in a lather up here in Washington these days about campaign contributions. Everybody hates them, but nobody wants to go to public funding. So we seem destined to some period of handwringing. And since we're in a spirit of full disclosure, I have to tell you that in addition to my coming here today, I received a gratuity, which I intend to